Belonging becomes a tricky proposition in any place one might call home these days. The lands where we make our lives and livings are always inhabited by hidden (often explicitly erased) histories and unheard voices. Sometimes these phantoms guide us to good places, and sometimes they lead us astray. Either way, it was certain ghosts of old Virginia and their makeshift promises of newfound belonging that brought my little ass family reeling back, again and again, to reckon with hopes and hauntings scattered in roadside ditches, hot parking lots, and waysides left behind in the hills and hollows of the so-called Old Dominion. At the same time, it was always real bodies – lives and loves caught up in unforgiving systems and structures – that we remained bound to as we were passing through.

A decade earlier, the abrupt collapse of a family horse farm had kicked off for me (if obliquely) a spinning spate of wanderings and tenuous dwellings in the company of an unnamed American Spotted Ass. Sure enough, the old Appalachian range that runs like a spine along the mid-Atlantic US state known as Virginia played a significant role in that first summer Aliass and I spent on the byways of three Southern states and beyond. The Dead-Car
Crossing, in turn, could be said to reflect an aching reluctance to leave that state. In different ways, each journey performed aspects of a much larger quest to tune into particular places in more inclusive ways. This special brand of twenty-first-century passing-through has sought to arrive at some kind of resolution of fraught, conflicted belongings within the unseen, untold, and unknowable stories of places. Meanwhile, acts of un-naming and passing through places with Aliass are also driven and shaped by more basic and mundane material and economic necessities – long-term negotiations with pushes and pulls of many different and often conflicting forces. Through years of wayward-ass wandering, the ever-present need to secure amenable living spaces for the herd was complicated by the situation of being a landless, rural–urban-divided female artist, whose access to “pastures of plenty” was limited by different hot-wired political, economic, and biographical factors.

Certain pastoral necessities are inescapable when it comes to living, traveling, and making temporary homes with/in a herd of grazers. Certain hard to satisfy, nomadic hungers for a nourishing and safe place to stay is one of the main forces that brought us back to Virginia in the spring of 2005, less than nine months after crossing the southern border into Carolina in the Dead-Car Wagon. A hazy promise of belonging brought us reeling back once more to assemble, in both creative and commonplace ways, amidst the psycho-geographic patchwork of pastures, asphalt, landfills, interstates, hardwood mountain forests, and hidden underground spaces known (for the most part affectionately) as the Valley of Dooms, Virginia.

The move back to Virginia in 2005 – back, that is, from a yearlong graduate school stint in Athens, Georgia – was first sparked by the happenstance discovery of a ramshackle rural speedway in a town called Dooms. This find was reported to me by L-Haw (aka Lydia Peelle), who had
recently moved to Charlottesville, Virginia from Whites Creek, Tennessee. As L-Haw happened upon the place on an exploratory bike ride one day, Dooms revealed itself to be a small rural hamlet, tucked like evidence of a bad habit into a shadowy Appalachian fold just northwest of the Afton Mt. Pass, whereby Interstate 64 crosses the Blue Ridge. So L-Haw’s discovery of this backwoods motor speedway in Dooms, Virginia resonated with certain unresolved questions still leaking from the creaky morass of the Dead-Car Crossing. And so it was that this Dooms speedway was the catalyst that brought our little herd reeling back to Virginia – not six months after the Dead-Car Wagon had rolled away from the glorious Fincastle farm in the grievous grind of reluctant departure. Suddenly I had to get us back to Virginia, no matter what it took.

This was hardly the first round in an ongoing cycle of departure and return to a state of troubled barn-dark belonging. I had come and gone from Virginia many times, by a dizzying assortment of means and speeds, in the nearly ten years since my family’s farm had blown apart like a seedy dandelion on the other side of the Blue Ridge. Yet the Shenandoah Valley to the west of the mountains was new territory, if close enough to the dark heart of Albemarle County to maintain a certain psycho-geographic charge. It was still Virginia, after all, the impossible home, the onerous state of perpetual (if not exactly Sisyphean) departures and returns. But this time would be different. This return to the Blue Ridge foothills and valleys below was not so much out of homesickness for the mythical Lost Paradise of the Past or wishes for an everlasting peace-of-ass. This time, it presented a shift toward something more present and pressingly possible, if speculative. Promises of grounding a new kind of nomadic-ass pastoral belonging resonated in the prospect of starting a brand new life in Dooms.
Oh yes, darkly hopeful promises attached (with only faintest irony) to this oddly named hamlet, just on the outskirts of gritty old Waynesboro, home to a few collapsing dairy farms, clusters of modest houses and trailer homes, a dusty and sprawling antique shop, and a downtown hot-dog stand. And so we did – go (back) to Dooms, that is. And so begins (again) the quest to secure an amenable home for a little nomadic ass herd – at the very least, a fenced pasture and some kind of barn for shelter – in the ravaged and glorious forests and fields of a rolling rural-industrial Appalachian valley. This effort to find and colonize a little homestead in the storied old Shenandoah landscapes was doomed from the get-go, of course. Nevertheless, the year spent wandering in the Valley of Dooms – on various county routes, wayward paths, and interstate exit ramps, searching in vain for a place to call home – would in its ultimate failure reveal unforeseen states of creative nomadic possibility. Though a bust in that way, that year in the Valley of Dooms boomed for a time, through hidden underground connections and wholly new creative modes for listening, composing with, and passing through beautiful, lively, endangered and untold places.

Pleasant Valley

Heaven knows I looked high and low for a place to call home with Passenger and Aliass and the Mutt of Gold. Lo and behold, it is not easy to find those longed-for pastures of plenty. It takes a long time, as I found out over the seasons of false starts and broken dreams in the Valley of Dooms, Virginia. What we did find – when we found it at last in an industry-encrusted, landfill-perfumed place on the southern edge of Harrisonburg, in the dubiously named Pleasant Valley – never did turn out to be the hoped-for peaceful-ass homestead it seemed at first to promise.
While humanly psycho-geographic longings haunt the push-and-pull necessities of making homes, other pressing material, economic, and logistical questions matter, too. Shuttling back and forth from place to place, we are driven by bodily needs and capital lacks, pulled by faint hopes and half-seen desires. More specifically, in our case, we were driven by distinct material requirements of caring for (not to mention transporting) a little ass family. With some premonition of complexities to come, before departing Athens, Georgia I had spray-painted a stencil of the full first stanza from a poem called “The Dog of Graffiti,” by poet Mark Bilbrey, onto the still-mangled passenger-side door of the Black Caprice:

Wholivesheresundaysorever
yotherweekendorforthemat
terwhenicomebyinthenylon
thinkingcapcauseafteralltha
twhenhomemovesandwew
homakerighthererewestayput

Like pastoral landscapes with their seemingly timeless, mostly inscrutable histories of conquest, displacement and constant change, Bilbrey’s poem challenges a reader to make meaning of a mass of possible patterns and configurations. The poem’s coy and haunting opacity resonated with my own special set of complex questions borne of twenty-first-century nomadic-ass homemaking in fragmented rural US places: Who lives here? What are you looking for? Where do you go now? Is it a place, or a way of life? And what is on the other side?2

2 I call these the R.A.W. Questions, though they predate the actual establishment of the Rural Alchemy Workshop by a year or two. I have animated and inhabited these questions in various performances of
I can’t recall how I came upon the property in Pleasant Valley, especially since it was more or less uninhabitable and not yet officially for rent. It was a derelict farmstead of two thickly thistle-blown acres, haphazardly fenced and scattered with peeling and crooked outbuildings and piles of toxic trash. The old two-bedroom farmhouse was “under renovation,” which is to say it had been gutted by the landlord’s crew – bathroom and kitchen stripped, doors off the hinges, holes in the floor, piles of raccoon shit littering the skeletal upstairs rooms – and the work had pretty much stopped there, indefinitely. The house was by no means ready for habitation, and I probably should have walked away right then and there. But then I saw the barn. As soon as I glimpsed that oddly perfect little white barn – with its old warped boards layered with peeling white paint and peculiar graffiti, perfectly sized for a pretty pair of spotted she-asses – I fell perilously in love. I looked past the fearsome dilapidation of the house and fences and the surrounding stretches of industrial gravel lots, steaming green chemical ponds, and fuming factories, blinded by a visionary future in which the asses grazed in peaceful perpetuity in grassy pastures, eating hay and dozing happily on cold nights or hot afternoons inside that humbly beautiful little white barn.

The landlord was dubious: Did I really want to wait around for him to finish renovations on the house? The answer was a desperate yes. For months I had sought hard for an affordable place with basic shelter and space requirements for Aliass and Passenger. I was willing to hunker down and wait for the house if it would mean realizing the fragile dream of a little homestead in the Valley of Dooms in the long run. So Mr. Landlord took pity on my plight, invested in an old camper with Cadillac hubcaps, and parked it next to the broken house, run-
ning power out by extension cord. And there we dwelled, me and the Mutt of Gold, for several months through the late summer and fall of 2005, while I worked to make the place ready for Aliass and Passenger to come “home.”

From August into the fall, I worked on mending the brokedown fences, trying to make a safe enclosure for Aliass and Pass, so I could bring them up from their temporary accommodations near Roanoke. Neither house nor camper had running water, so I had to drive up Route 11 a few miles toward town to the Sheetz gas-station convenience store to enjoy the luxury of indoor plumbing. By early October, I had strung a makeshift electric fence around a part of the pasture, and the barn was ready. Aliass and Pass arrived at last one day, and a week of blissful browsing on thistles and weeds ensued. A pastoral dream materialized – not without irony – as the sheasses dozed behind the graffiti-marked barn door where someone had scrawled the word “PEACE” along with what appeared to be an upside-down, incomplete peace sign and some other indecipherable hieroglyphs.

Along with the inevitable need for a suitable place to dwell with the donkeys, this move to the Valley of Dooms was also a nascent performance – a deliberate, experimental, and exploratory in-habitation of one specific form of “relational aesthetics,” seeking to investigate and frame relations within these places and our possible roles within them. For this reason, and for lack of other options, I was ready to inhabit not just the (un)Pleasant Valley farmstead but also to fully and performatively inhabit the situation of being a single-woman-with-herbivorous-herd in the throes of trying to find and make a good-ass

3 Aliass and Passenger were living it up in grassy fields with a rowdy multigenerational herd of rescued donkeys on the ever-welcoming Cheryl Haas’s farm near Fincastle. They were happy, but I missed them terribly. Home is, after all, where one’s ass is.
home in a ragged Appalachian rural–agricultural–industrial zone.\textsuperscript{4}

Had it worked out, this might have been a little victory. This manifestation of Virginia homemaking, where the home we made was no longer bound to a static, Lost Place in the Past but hitched instead to a dynamic inhabitation of lively possibilities in fraught, fragile, and transient twenty-first-century pastoral places. Stretching feminist philosopher Dehlia Hannah’s frame, I might go so far as to describe the effort to establish an amenable locus for the family herd in the Valley of Dooms as a kind of psycho-geographic-sociocultural-economic-aesthetic-multispecies “performative experiment.”\textsuperscript{5} In any case, this performative-experimental approach to homesteading, undergirded as it was by darkly hopeful visions of a radical little dairy-ass enterprise in Dooms – and of course a

\textsuperscript{4} It helped that I was newly engaged in the vibrant socially engaged artistic community of Goddard College’s low-residency MFA-Interdisciplinary Arts program, and so generating biweekly projects and reflections of this process as a durational performance-art practice. Had it not been for the intellectual–artistic support of the Goddard network and friends closer at hand, I might not have been able to take such a rosy view of, say, having to drive several miles to the Sheetz up the Route 11 commercial strip to use the bathroom, or having to reckon with nightmares about what was hidden in the naked walls in the torn-open house, or whatever phantoms or residues made the Mutt of Gold tremble whenever we went inside the supposed soon-to-be home.

\textsuperscript{5} Dehlia Hannah describes performative experiments as “aesthetic interventions [...] calculated to illuminate features of experimental design, materials and methods, and conventions of interpretation that tend to escape attention in the practice of everyday science.” Eben Kirksey, Dehlia Hannah, Charlie Lotterman, and Lisa Jean Moore, “The Xenopus Pregnancy Test: A Performative Experiment,” \textit{Environmental Humanities} 8, no. 1 (2016): 37. Emphasizing the performative–aesthetic aspect over specifically scientific engagements, I look to interdisciplinary fields of ethological, social-scientific, and philosophical–artistic bodies of knowledge to experimentally illuminate practices of nomadic home-makings with multispecies herds in the twenty-first-century Valley of Dooms, Virginia.
need for somewhere to hang our hats and halters – gave a
certain outlaw courage to my efforts. We hunkered down,
in spite of prevailing discomforts, uncertainties, and the
all-night clanking, buzzing, and big-rig braking from the
windowless factory right across the road.

But lo, the Valley of Dooms lived up to its name. That
late summer and fall of 2005, disasters darkened the al-
ready prickly dream of Pleasant Valley homesteading. For
one thing, Hurricane Katrina. I had no TV and scant in-
ternet access while living in the Cadillac-hubcap camper,
but the news came through the radio as I drove around
the valley in the Black Caprice. I will never forget sitting
at a red light near an exit ramp off Interstate 81 and hear-
ing New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin’s tearful pleading for
help from slow-moving federal forces, as the city’s inhab-
itants drowned and struggled to survive, huddled against
the storm’s ferocity and lack of aide in the aftermath.
Meanwhile, the nights turned cold in the camper, which
had only a small borrowed space heater. I would wake up
in my sleeping bag to find the Mutt of Gold shivering in
spite of the Joan Jett t-shirt she wore and the heater blow-
ing directly onto her bed on the floor. And it was getting
too cold to pee outside (the only option). So in a flurry
one day, I gave up. I made some calls and found a place to
board the donkeys down Route 11, in a small hilly pasture
with a cozy shed they shared with a fuzzy, fat miniature
horse named Andy. And that was when the Mutt and I
moved into a rented room with Libby, a divorced mother
of two grown kids who worked at the local community
college where I was adjunct-teaching English composi-
tion, mostly at night.

Other misfortunes visited us through the fall and into
that winter in the Valley of Dooms. In late November
some thieves broke into my storage unit in Waynesboro,
rifled through all my belongings and stole everything
electronic or seemingly valuable. Most heartbreaking
was the theft of my solar-powered electric-fence charger,
which had made it possible in most places for me to single-handedly construct and wire up a little ass paddock, anywhere I could sink a ground-rod. I was devastated by this loss, and maybe more so by the inability to make clear – to the policeman to whom I reported the theft, or to the pawn-shop owners I questioned in search of my fenced fencing goods – just how vital that particular (pricey) piece of agricultural equipment was to a fragile, nomadic-ass livelihood. The charger never turned up. Winter was coming. For the time being Aliass and Pass, the Mutt and I were safe in temporary refuges (if separated by a ten-mile stretch of Route 11). We settled into the rented room in Weyers Cave, defeated but grateful for homely comforts like baseboard heat and indoor plumbing, and more so for the woods and grassy meadow by the little river where the Mutt and I wandered daily. Pleasant Valley was behind us, and we had no truck with it anymore. And yet, certain shadowy structures lingered hidden in that ever-shifting, shadowy Shenandoah landscape, and soon they came a-knocking in unexpected ways.

Black Stallions in the Mud

One site in particular rose up in a fierce and daunting way. Back in early October, when I was still struggling to make the derelict Pleasant Valley property habitable, I had needed to go away for a weekend. I could not leave Aliass and Passenger in the makeshift paddock without supervision, though, so I was in a fix. One day a neighbor named Darrell, a widower who would come by sometimes to chat when I was out working on the fence, told me, “There’s an old feller up the road who keeps horses. Maybe he could help. He’s Black feller, but he’s alright.”

A few days later I drove up the road over the hill in hopes of checking out the place Darrell mentioned. About a mile along, I saw a rundown stable, set down a steep hill off on the side of the road. In a maze of muddy, hap-
hazardly fenced paddocks and manure piles sat a sprawling, patchwork-tin-roofed barn that looked like a sinking ship, surrounded by a sea of broken-down cars and trucks and refuse piles. I turned the Black Caprice slowly down the steep gravel driveway, rolled through a metal gate, and parked in front of a single-wide trailer with a pallet porch and tarp awnings. I got out and walked toward the barn, looking for someone to talk to. Wandering into the labyrinthine barn, I found that it was full of horses, submerged in dark stalls and moving eerily in the dimness like underwater creatures.

A metallic hammering sound came from around a corner. I followed the hammering to find a burly man, roughly in his thirties, in a ripped t-shirt and banging on a tractor part. I introduced myself and told him I was looking for a place to board my donkeys for a day or two, though even as the words came out I already knew I could not leave Aliass and Passenger at this stable, even for a weekend. Something about the establishment felt precarious, endangered. (Looking back, I am amazed how even in transient pastoral-nomad mode, a sense of safety is a privilege to which I felt entitled, for myself and Mutt and asses.) The man told me that the farm belonged to Charlie, who wasn't home, but to come back another time and maybe he could work something out. I got back in the Black Caprice and drove off, with no intention of returning. A couple weeks later, I abandoned Pleasant Valley for good, leaving only traces of our brief habitation – scattered piles of manure and hay and some more mysterious graffiti to add to the odd palimpsest in the little white barn’s hayloft.

But something about Charlie’s precarious rundown stable settled like a stormy cloud-shadow over my comings and goings in the Valley of Dooms. One night in February, curled up safe and warm under blankets in the rented room, I had a furious nightmare in which a flood came and – precisely as a bull’s-eye shot – washed
Charlie’s farm off the face of the earth. In the dream, and then again in a brief surge on waking, this felt like the saddest thing I could imagine. The sadness was so huge, and especially strange, too, because I had not been back to Pleasant Valley or thought consciously about Charlie’s farm in months. The intensity of the nightmare was such that it required immediate attention, and even action. In the performative mode of Valley of Dooms habitation, I realized that I had to go back to Charlie’s and find out what was happening there.

What I discovered when I worked up the guts to go back was this: Sunk off to the side of the rural byway and slowly going under, Charlie’s stable was a barn-dark moth-erlode of uneasy histories and forces where humans and horses and landholdings in racially divided, colonial Virginia chafe against wheelbarrow-loads of broken dreams, frayed connections, and impossible cares stretched to the breaking point. Feeling weird about driving, I borrowed a friend’s bicycle and rode out from a municipal-building parking lot, past the spuming factories and landfill and cattle pastures through Pleasant Valley, and then uphill for a mile or two along the shoulderless highway, until I came to Charlie’s place. No one was around, it seemed, so I left a note on a barrelhead in the barnyard, with my phone number and a message saying that I was a horse-lover and to call me if he had need for help with chores or working with any of his horses. Weeks went by, and then one snowy day in February came a muffled voice-mail message. Charlie’s thick Virginia accent and mumbled words in the message were hard to make out, but I got enough to understand that he welcomed me, if tenta-tively. He said he probably had some horses I could ride, if that’s what I was after.

In early March of that year, I began to drive out to Charlie’s barn once a week or so, when the weather al-lowed. I came to know Charlie a little, and his one-eyed beagle named Trouble even stopped barking at me after
a while. Charlie was ambiguously aged and mostly crippled. He walked with a crutch when he did walk, and otherwise he drove a little muddy golf-cart around the place, though mostly it was broke-down and he often just sat on it and watched over the farm’s goings-on. Charlie had some help with the burden of relentless chores that come with caring for thirty-some horses, or the horses would not have survived long. But from what I could tell and the little he chose to share, he was mostly on his own, living in the single-wide trailer with only one-eyed Trouble and the tremendous burden of caring for a large and needy equine herd.

For reasons I will never grasp, Charlie’s barn was full of stallions. I believe it had been years since he did any horse-breeding, but there they were, wasting away in dark wooden confinement. For all the familiar and pleasant smells and sounds of stable life – all of which kicked my family-farm-exiled, 4-H-raised horseperson-body into high gear – this barn was also a nightmare. I often found horses standing in stalls up to their fetlocks in excrement, with no water in their buckets. Enormous rats raced back and forth across the aisles and stopped to stare a person down. When I showed up I would ask Charlie what he needed, feed and fill buckets and clean stalls as I could. But I could not come every day, and I didn’t know who otherwise was doing the at-least twice-daily feeding chores. Charlie had helpers, but I hardly ever saw anyone when I was there. He was doing the best he could, as he had been doing for decades. In a rare moment of conversation one day, Charlie told me how in the 1960s he had worked as a stablehand until he raised enough cash to buy the thirty-two acres of brushy cedar hills we stood on. He cleared it by hand, built the barn and fences. One winter he had lost his entire herd in a barn-fire, and then slowly rebuilt, board by warped board. He had been young then.
Going out to Charlie’s gave a difficult pleasure. There was satisfaction in moving around barn-spaces and smells and sounds, tools, and implements in forgotten ways, yet the situation was deeply troubling. I admired Charlie for maintaining the old dream of his horse farm, somehow holding it together with bent nails, leaky hoses, duct tape, and baling twine. But every time I showed up, I witnessed devastating neglect: horses imprisoned in the dark stalls, their cracked and overgrown hooves rotting in urine and excrement, their moods depressed (or sometimes crazed) by lack of fresh air and sunlight. The friction was especially fierce after I made friends with one little black pony stallion, whose name I never knew, and who never got out of his cramped stall (in which he could barely turn around), unless I came to take him out to the paddock or to graze on a leadrope. The first time I tried to groom the little black stallion, he pinned his ears, bit and struck at me with a front hoof when I tried to brush his head. Later I realized I had been hurting him because the halter he wore was never taken off, and the nylon strap had galled the flesh beneath it.

Charlie never seemed to care one way or the other if I showed up or not. But the black pony stallion did come to care, after a while, because my appearance meant he could get out of his stall into the fresh air for a time – and even get a taste of new spring grass that grew in a lush patch by the broken-down horse van. After a while, he would brighten when he saw me appear over his stall door. Over time I came to feel the pull of the little black pony stallion waiting in his dark stall as a constant, no matter where I was in my daily comings and goings around the Valley of Dooms. In every moment I was somewhere else, I was failing to show up for him, and he was waiting, maybe suffering.

This right here, what swarms in the mysterious energies and affects that built Charlie’s barn and all the fences, stall latches, gates, bits and bridles, and other ap-
The bond is the deepest drive of living with Aliass

and herd, too. Let me testify to this cave-deep rootedness at the heart of artistic representation, with a document of my own earliest image making, which is a picture I drew as a child of six after the 1980 film *The Black Stallion* carved a wild dark horse-shaped hole in my guts that that has never closed up.

Some might call this horse hole a “soul,” of the kind Gary Snyder evokes when he says, “Our ‘soul’ is our dream of the other.” Others describe it otherwise, through scientific-philosophical-biocultural registers like Donna Haraway’s “sympoeisis” or Vinciane Despret’s “anthropo-zoo-genesis.” What matters more here is not so much the names we give (or don’t) to this tremulous opening, but rather the anomalously powerful black-hole gravitational pull of it. And even more important is the fact that this possible bond, this affective push and pull and chafe and gall of beastly bodies, is never pure and free, but always compromised in thousands of complex ways by the situations in which we find ourselves trying to live and make livings in each other’s midst. Bonds become especially barbed and twisted in sites where kinships are undermined by classified hierarchies like breed and bloodline. These forces often determine the chances each beast will have for well-being and access to basic necessities like fresh air and grass, or whatever a given body happens to desire and need. In these places, capitalist commodifications play a role in valuing some lives as more or less worthy of having what they want and need than others. Under conditions like these, fragile ties fray and chafe against every living body they touch, like the nylon strap

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of a halter left on so long that the fur wears away and the tender flesh begins to absorb it.

More than any other site in the Valley of Dooms, Charlie’s farm presents haunting challenges and troubling specters inherent in certain nomadic ass tendencies, where escape is not only the privilege of freedom to move on to better and brighter places, but also to abandon the places where our nerves or ethical capacities fail. Charlie’s farm sheltered and sustained valued ways of life that have historically bound horses and humans together in this and other configurations, but at the time I came across it, the farm was also a disaster of suffering and impending doom for those who lived there. Sunk off the side of the rural highway in a shifting zone where Harrisonburg suburban sprawl pushes against older farms, county landfill sites, and factories, Charlie’s place was full of knotted histories of horses and humans and others, whose lives and unwritten biographies persist even as political and economic forces mobilize to bulldoze them under rapid human housing sprawl. Or more slowly, by the waysides of naturalcultural obsolescence in which certain lives might find ways to persist or else fail, and bail, falter and fade.

In Charlie’s barnyard I found a muddy morass I could not see a way through, where practical ethics and imagination both failed to provide a clear path. I did not know

9 I might present my engagement with Charlie’s farm as an artist–researcher engaged in creative intervention, through the lens of contemporary relational aesthetics and site-specific, socially-engaged performance practices. I might, but I won’t. It feels more appropriate here to echo Kathryn Gillespie and Rosemary-Claire Collard, who bring to light certain ethical conflicts that come with witnessing sufferings of other domestic species from a certain (academic) remove, calling attention to “a larger problem with the act of witnessing and field research in general – namely that this work is done in service of long-term future change, but frequently does nothing for the individual whose suffering is being witnessed.” Kathryn Gillespie and Rosemary-Claire Collard, eds., Critical Animal Geographies: Politics, In-
what to do. For the horses, I probably should have called someone, some animal welfare organization. I was fairly sure that if Charlie’s motley herd of mostly aged, crippled grade horses were seized by a rescue group or the county, many would likely end up going to slaughter. Some of them might have been saved. But I could not bring myself to betray Charlie in this way.

Did I betray the horses, then? How do we navigate through lives filled with loved ones otherwise known as livestock, who we may be compelled to sell, put down, or otherwise abandon to another’s care when money runs low or time comes to move on? I did not have access to the necessary capital, either economic or political, that might have settled matters in other ways. One thing seemed certain: the ship was going down, and one way or another it would all be over before long. I could not save Charlie’s farm, whatever that might have looked like, and after all nobody asked me to. I had not been able to save my mother’s farm, either. And anyway, I was only passing through.

*tersections, and Hierarchies in a Multispecies World* (London: Routledge, 2015), 204.
Nomads in the Valley of Dooms

It is a lucky few who can easily uproot and leave behind places that fail to meet needs or standards, who can up and go at will by lines of flight that track or flee flows of capital, changing climates, and other forces that benefit some while wreaking havoc on others. Some privileges allow or obligate us to migrate after “pastures of plenty,” but freedom to move nomadically is not equally available to everybody, human or otherwise. We are tied together in and across specific spaces and the shadow places connected to them, in various ways – be it Charlie and his black stallions bound to the fate of those precarious thirty-two acres in Pleasant Valley, or omnipresent invisible ties across global pathways that link diverse lives to faraway places never seen or imagined. We are always connected to places we pass through and those we leave behind, along with the scattered ways we choose to inherit or resist prevailing systems within specific places’ vanished histories and faulty infrastructures of race, gender, and species.

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In the early spring of 2006, everything changed. Love came rolling up to Weyers Cave in an old red Ford F-150 with a silver stripe, driven by a seethingly brilliant philosopher-farmboy. Soon formidable new passions and promises of hopeful ass husbandry beckoned our herd to another place, another Southern state. And so it was time to go again.

Leaving Virginia was never easy. From this looming departure, and all the other failures to dwell deep and enduringly in the Valley of Dooms, came a series of journey

projects that sought to creatively address, if not assuage, the shames and the creative forces borne in practices of passing-through. Adapting our proceedings from traditional movements of domestic herds of humans and herbivorous mammals who make their livings by transhumance – migrating seasonally from one grazeable land to another – two different but linked projects called the She-Haw Transhumance and the “Can We Sleep in Your Barn Tonight?” Mystery Tour assembled to move, play, listen, and improvise in slow deliberation through this particular pastoral, agricultural-postindustrial landscape.

In different configurations and assemblages, each of these projects plays on speculative past and future resonances of transhumance, limned by contemporary artistic, poetic, and (cosmo)political nomadic theory (à la Isabelle Stengers and Rosi Braidotti), to pitch into places and explore unique possibilities for “assthetic” acts of
passing through.\textsuperscript{11} Together, She-Haw Transhumance and the “Can We Sleep in Your Barn Tonight?” Mystery Tour became a bizarre ass farewell tour, as nomadic assemblages of mammalian companions and insects and birds and grasses came together in a peculiar sort of wake for the untold pasts and futures of old barns, valley fields and watersheds, and ways of life woven through them. In search of nourishment for the hordes of ghosts and future friends who may walk these hills, we set forth into the roadside ditches, overgrown meadows, dusty barn-darks, and interstate winds of the Valley of Dooms, to acknowledge, embrace, and even celebrate the necessary failure of any safe, stable, or static place to call home in an age of frayed belongings for so many earthly inhabitants.

She-Haw Transhumance

– I speak as one silenced. Transhumance, as understood and utilized in late 12th C., early 13th C. France, was an agricultural motion or migration, a seasonal moving of livestock and the people who tend them […] but transhumance also was a possible personal~social act of symmetry, reciprocity and redistribution. Co-mercy, the art of harmlessness […] to let, to kneel, along the places of the abyss,

\textsuperscript{11} A number of contemporary artists incorporate modes of performative walking into aesthetic and political explorations of places. The practices of Hamish Fulton in the later twentieth century and the work of contemporary artist Angela Ellsworth delve into the aesthetic and political possibilities and consequences of creative walking. Theoretically speaking, She-Haw’s artistic listening-walking performance of becomings-with-asses-and-grasses addresses pressing questions of multispecies belonging that are kin to Rosi Braidotti’s nomadic theory, seeking “a regrounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environment s/he inhabits.” Rosi Braidotti, \textit{Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 122.
to linger as long as possible [...] where the same relation may be observed throughout the whole universe, where significance “bleeds into an unconstrainable chain.”

– Lissa Wolsak, “an_heuristic_prolusion”

Just past the crack of dawn on a hot May morning in 2006, She-Haw – an assemblage of two spotted she-asses, Aliass and Passenger, led by two bipedal human artists, L-Haw (Lydia Peelle) and K-Haw (yours truly) – set off from the weedy verge of the interstate exit ramp just outside Mt. Sidney, Virginia. We tacked up on the roadside and packed the saddlebags with water bottles, bug spray, and sunblock, and then ambled off into the morning heat, four femammals making our ways slowly along country roads that wound through farm fields and industrial accretions, in the valley below darkly folded foothills of the Appalachian Blue Ridge mountain range. The wind from eighteen-wheelers buffeted us as we made our ways along an access road between the roaring interstate on one side and sprawling nursery for residential landscape shrubs on the other. As we walked, we did not talk. The impulse to put our bodies in place of our speech (in choreographer Emily Stone’s words) drove us to make the journey in silence that day. Well, not silence, exactly. We humans agreed in advance that during this She-Haw Transhumance we would refrain from speaking, from sharing verbal observations or otherwise imposing our voices into the landscape (unless for safety alerts, like “Car!” or “Snake!”). We would still our tongues for the duration of the trek, and instead listen for untold stories in the places we passed through, in deeply embodied ways.

Artistically speaking (or rather not-speaking), She-Haw Transhumances perform and explore complex quandaries of multispecies belonging and human artistic

representation – most specifically the galls and thralls found in such seamy rural–industrial places where the ontological, ethical, and “assthetic” desires of a pair of nomadic storying women meet the mysterious surfaces and depths of long-eared embodied equine wisdoms and different practices of living with them. She-Haw is a collaborative venture that brings together different artistic practices and strategies to track untold stories through places where we find all kinds of beastly bodies meeting the burdens of domestic human desires. L-Haw (aka Lydia Peelle) writes fiction, including a celebrated 2009 story collection, *Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing*, and the 2017 novel, *The Midnight Cool*.³ In the guise of a historical novel, *The Midnight Cool* makes delicate lacunae for the untold stories of others, especially the thousands of Tennessee mules shipped to the bloody mire of WWI battlefields in Europe. Lydia Peelle, *The Midnight Cool* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

Meanwhile, She-Haw Transhumance also draws on different contemporary artistic strategies to actualize twenty-first-century, rural–postindustrial beastly situatedness, and so open up what Rosi Braidotti describes as “virtual possibilities that had been frozen in the image of the past.”⁴ In this regard, as much as we are (dis)inheritors of our grandfathers’ barnyards, She-Haw is heir to Sun Ra’s slick earthbound inversions of Space-Age Afro-futurisms and also bastard cousin to artist-provocateur Praba Pilar’s cyborg–shaman–Coyote interventions in transhumanist technotranscendence.⁵ With an ear to these modes, She-Haw

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⁴ Rosi Braidotti also evokes the key roles of creative imagination and memory in this process of “becoming-woman-animal-insect-indecipherable”: she writes that “imagination plays a crucial role in [...] conceptual creativity and ethical empowerment. It is connected to memory [...]. When you remember in the intensive or minority-mode, you open up spaces of movement and of deterrioralization that actualize virtual possibilities that had been frozen in the image of the past.” Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 53.

⁵ Distinct from “transhumanism,” which expects humans to “transcend” biological limitations through ever-advancing futuristic
Transhumance navigates fraught realms of imaginative representation and conflicted wonderings of who we are and how we might entwine our cares and tongues with the fleshly webs of other lives, ghosts, and swarming motes in pastoral ecologies.

So She-Haw made the walk that day without talking, in exclusively non-verbal human ways at least. At the same time, what we hoped to honor and attend in the course of this “silent” passage through the valley is really as far from silence as you can get. In openings where strange voices and unknown presences proliferate, She-Haw Transhumances amplify the force of James Clifford’s insight that, “Silence is stories that do not translate.”

L-Haw evokes the resonance of meaningful silences like these in her award-winning short story “Mule Killers.” As the narrator recollects the time when tractors arrived on farms in the early twentieth century to take the place of mule labor, he recalls how “all across the state that year, big trucks loaded with mules rumbled steadily to the slaughterhouses. They drove over the roads that mules

technologies and exceptional rationality, these modes of creative Transhumance take an opposite tack. As Cary Wolfe describes “transhumanism” as a direct descendent of “ideals of human perfectibility, rationality and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment,” he distinguishes that mode of thinking from a “posthumanism” that names the “embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world” and also recognizes “a historical moment in which the centering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatics, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore.” Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv. Like Sun Ra’s Astro Black Mythology, artist-scholar Praba Pilar’s Church of Nano-Cogno-Info-Bio intervenes brilliantly in notions of transhumanism whereby humanity is expected to “transcend” its mortal animal nature. See Praba Pilar’s website, http://www.prabapilar.com/pages/projects/churchnbic2.html/.

themselves had cut, the gravel and macadam the mules themselves had laid. Once or twice a day, you would hear a high-pitched bray come from one of the trucks, a rattling as it went by, and then silence.”

For our human parts, at least, the experience of moving slowly on foot and hoof through earthly places with the wary, watchful, grass-hungry, and attentive she-asses is a creative effort to listen differently and to open environments in ways exclusive human-centered storyings can’t do – to honor and make new spaces for the different ways that others might story themselves in places. Vinciane Despret and Michel Meuret describe a similar collaborative, “cosmoecological” approach among contemporary European humans and domestic sheep, who have taken up transhumant herding practices in spite of these traditions’ local cultural and economic obsolescence. These newfangled herding practices are “arts for living on a damaged planet,” as they pitch transhumance into blasted landscapes in ways that change everybody involved; their mixed herds of mammal, plant, insect, and microbial communities “inhabit and compose with” the landscapes they pass through in newfound ways: “We say compose with because to inhabit is at once to be transformed by the environment and to transform it. [...] Transhumance is one of these ways of inhabiting and so composing with a place, a space in time.”

So She-Haw set out through the Valley of Dooms that morning to compose-with the she-asses, grasses, and untold others. She-Haw Transhumances are acts of listening-in-places (as best we can) within the limits of our human attunements and umwelts alongside those of our long-eared, dusty-furred, otherworldly friends.

Geographically, the distance we walked on foot and hoof in the stifling humidity of early-summer Virginia was roughly seven miles – a fairly straight shot along back roads, with a little stretch of county highway and the tiny town of Weyers Cave in between. We ambled slowly along at the preferred speed of the she-asses (roughly <2 mph), in a steady rhythm of bare hoofbeats on asphalt and occasional whiffs of blooming honeysuckle on the breeze. Aliass and Passenger were eager as always to snatch bites of the tall roadside grasses, and their long hollow ears swiveled constantly, catching little sounds from near and far. As the heat of the day came on, we walked in slow immersion within a wild swell of sounds, from the click of the she-asses’ hooves on the macadam to crickets in the grassroot shadows to the lows of dairy cows inside an old tin-sided barn, where we stopped to bask in that swollen sounding resonance for a time. The pale asphalt road rolled and wound up and down hills, past pastures and hayfields and neatly tended flowerbeds that wrap around single-story brick ranch houses with long paved driveways and two-car garages. The grassy, gravelly, asphalt patchwork of agricultural, industrial, and residential zones we plodded through were thickly crisscrossed with strands of barbed, cedary longings and raw-ass hopes and fears – all of which wove us more deeply than we could ever know into (in)visible traces of myriad lifeways that abide in that shifting landscape.

Alongside our lovely long-eared companions, She-Haw Transhumance holds spaces for untold stories in places where human perspectives and ways of knowing and navigating are never the only ones we need to attend to, whether in the Valley of Dooms or anywhere else. Over the years various forays have led She-Haw to transhumance through different kinds of seamy sites: From the spectacular Mule Day Parade in Tennessee, to dim cobwebby corners of county-fair barns where we find ourselves following mysterious handwritten signs
that feature inkjet pictures of indigo buntings and promise “this way for REAL beauty...,” to the damp and gravelly paths into Paleolithic caves in the Perigord Noir and Hotel Cro-Magnon, where we meet cloven-hooved and spotted-fur ghosts of ancient earthly herds. We wander into and through supposed silences of marginal others, from disregarded beasts to unseen kinships that unfold in hidden processes and paths: in other words, we chase new forms of flocks and folds in meshes of untold stories of beastly becomings with(in) places.

The “Can We Sleep in Your Barn Tonight?” Mystery Tour

While She-Haw Transhumance evokes and composes with others’ stories by not-speaking as we pass through places, the “Can We Sleep in Your Barn Tonight?” Mystery Tour took a different approach for tuning in to inscrutable compositions in the places we passed through. The Mystery Tour was a three-day trek of a motley band, including (but not limited to) a fluctuating crew of human musician/artists, Aliass and Passenger, two borrowed miniature goats (Pink and Green), and a number of canine companions, among others. The Mystery Tour departed on a bright Tuesday morning in June (a few days after the She-Haw Transhumance) in a fanfare of handheld drums and hoofbeats and bells and goat bleats. For the next three days, this nomadic band of wayfaring strangers rolled along on foot and hoof through roadsides, fields, barnyards, and even a hidden cave, in a rollicking wake for what’s hidden and endangered in present Appalachian landscapes. Most especially we honored what lives in the old wooden barns that are quite literally subsiding, along with their unwritten languages and ways of knowing, by the wayside of interstates, suburban development, and industrial agribusiness.

While the trek along rural roadsides toward the town of Dooms itself was a vital part of the performance, the
“Can We Sleep in Your Barn Tonight?” Mystery Tour had another distinct method for tuning into indeterminate plays between all the living presences (known and unknown) in the old barns and underground. As we moved through the valley, the Mystery Tour band assembled in specific spaces to perform musical improvisation—specifically within two remarkable old barns (known to us as The Churchbarn and the Octagonal Barn) and one spectacular show cave. The “Can We Sleep in Your Barn Tonight?” Mystery Tour comprised a postmodern melding of sources and inspirations, from the Beatles’ Magical Mystery Tour to the gritty echoes of North Carolina old-time banjo player Charlie Poole (who recorded an especially haunting version of the old-time tune, “May I Sleep in Your Barn Tonight, Mister?”), along with a certain homage to James Joyce’s notion of language asleep in *Finnegans Wake*. The human crew who gathered to walk and play in the Valley of Dooms came in from cities and towns all over the US. With a common grounding in experimental improvisation, the Mystery Tour band mixed diverse musicological passions and improvisational skills. Main players Pamela Albanese, Rennie Elliot, Layne Garrett, Jacob Mitas, Melanie Moser, George Murer, Alex Ney, and Eli Queen all improvised and listened together, merging influences from punk and neofolk and eerie old-time fiddle tunes, fringed and flayed with George’s shredding electric guitar and Middle-Eastern drums in the Octagonal Barn, Alex’s wicked clawhammer banjo, strange vocal rounds summoned by Melanie from hand-painted religious signs in the Churchbarn loft, Rennie’s rollicking Dolly-Parton-inscribed banjo, and Jacob Mitas’s hints of Arvo Pärt in the cave, among many other resonanc-

19 Grand Caverns, as it is known, has been in use as a commercial show cave beneath the valley since the time of the US Civil War in the nineteenth century. We gained access to this cave for the final night of the Mystery Tour thanks to a winter I spent employed there as a part-time cave tour guide.
es woven through. So the band played on, improvising with all kinds of analog and digital electronics, strangely resonant religious placards, dusty radio waves, hayblown night-barn vocal harmonies, and the quivering vibrations of Pamela Albanese’s musical saw.  

In each of the two special barns we passed through, and especially on that last night deep in the cave, the band practiced improvisation in response to the distinct spaces where we found ourselves. This creative mode of deep listening (with roots in the works of John Cage and Pauline Oliveros, especially) in places set out to fathom and celebrate – through acoustical presence and musical, lyrical improvisation with stringed instruments, woodwinds, drums, and whatever else was along – what and who is hidden, yet present and resonant, in the motes, seeds, stalagmites, and oak-beams of these spaces’ own wilder creaks and hums, and how they harmonize with entangled roots and hides and bones. 

At the same time, we also try to recognize the limits of our listening in territories with complex histories, full of untold stories in which we are always more deeply implicated than we ever reckon.

20 Sean Hart held it all together and kept things running on the roads and campsites. We were also joined at stages by poets, artists, and wanderers Jessica Bozek, Kate Herron, Douglas Smith, and photographers Shane Carpenter and Susanna Slocum.

21 In other registers, Rosi Braidotti has some fascinating insights that resonate with the Mystery Tour’s modus operandi in her essay, “The Cosmic Buzz of Insects”; here she discusses the ways in which “nomadic or rhizomatic musicology attempts to make us hear the inaudible. [...] The becoming-minoritarian of music produces a practice of expression without a monolithic or unitary subject that supervises the operations and capitalizes upon them. It literally brings the cosmos home.” Braidotti, Nomadic Theory, 109–10.

22 Again, for all the creative intentions of these practices, the privileges we take for granted in accessing places are never innocent. Take, for example, the role of show caves in the proliferation of the vicious white-nose disease that has been extinguishing bat species around the world. See Tessa Laird, Bat (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).
In these different, nomadic radical-listening assemblages, She-Haw Transhumance and the “Can We Sleep in Your Barn Tonight?” Mystery Tour wound through the Valley of Dooms in their distinct modes, buffeted doubly by invisible histories and the roar of interstate truck-traffic along the rural roadsides, then deeper into the landscape, past dairy-farm barnyards dotted with veal-calf igloos. From Weyers Cave and the banks of the foamy green North Fork of the Shenandoah River, we moved through shadowy hopes and brighter visions hidden in the folded hills and barn-dark infrastructures of this colonial, agricultural-postindustrial Southern US state of Virginia – which is to say, trying to locate ourselves within different kinds of belonging and to make ourselves more “response-able” to the wholeness of places, even as we know we are only passing through. From within different orientations (both biographically chartable and utterly unknown), we made our ways – walking, listening, wondering, improvising – on grassy edges in diesel-laden winds with many different hungers and hopes for where we might be headed on the supposed road to Dooms, and what we might find when we get there.

Must Be Moving On...

Transhumances became one creative way of reckoning with all the barn-dark chafes and galls, sources and sites of painful conflicts and betrayals found in the Valley of Dooms, and everywhere else that is haunted by extractive global capitalism and other hungry forces. Each body carries (through the Valley and its shadow places) a distinct burden of embodied memories, hungers, and fears, gathered from past places, from places’ buried pasts, and from the worrisome ways things always seem to be headed. Even so, nomadic-ass forays and home-making are pitched to resist the bulldozing of multispecies futures and blaze trails toward more just assemblages –
whenever those may be amidst thickets of bodies in the mangled, wondrous, and often toxic places where we find ourselves. And so, through failed and fleeting experimental habitations in the Valley of Dooms, I learned that the letting-go of static notions of belonging can open vital paths toward future possible-ass pastures. In *Emergent Ecologies*, Eben Kirksey calls out the dominant mode of doom-saying in contemporary environmental discourses, and the book as whole beckons readers to “reject apocalyptic thinking” and grasp “the possibility of grounding hopes in shared futures”: “Tactfully guiding interspecies collaborations, new generations are learning how to care for emergent assemblages by seeding them, nurturing them, protecting them, and ultimately letting go.”

So this is how we say goodbye to obsolete dreams and fractured belongings scattered through the Valley of Dooms: Seeking hope for new, more inclusive kinds of belonging, we keep passing through blasted places, in the aura of unnamed associates. Moving on together in the common search for nourishment, in recognition of the shifting sources of what each body needs, while seeking shelter from whatever one must try to evade, too: from hot sun and unprecedented storms to shady landlords, rampant global corporations, and other dangerous or predatory forces less easily named. As we seek to find ourselves-with-others more wholly in places, it matters who is here, who and how “we” are, and how we compose ourselves with/in twisted-together stories of other species, where a lack of history as such is too often deployed to write off and erase others’ lives as meaningless silence.

It matters whether, and how, different lives and their distinct voices are bulldozed and buried, or instead brought to light and soundings in collective revelries. Vibrantly untold stories might be otherwise heard and sung

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in intimate meshes of bodies’ pulsing unknowns, in the shadowy folds of foothills, fields, and undergrounds we might call home and must always, in the long run, let go of.